

THE KING'S TRYST

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BY ROBERT BARR

THE KING ruled. There was none to question the supremacy of James V. At the age of 22 he now sat firmly on his throne. He was at peace with England, friendly with France, and was pledged to take a wife from that country. His great-grandfather, James II, had crushed the Black Douglas, and he himself had scattered the Red Douglas to exile. No Scottish noble was now powerful enough to threaten the stability of the throne. The country was contented and prosperous, so James might well take his pleasure as best pleased him. If any danger lurked near him it was unseen and unthought of.

The king, ever first in the chase, whether the quarry ran on four legs or on two, found himself alone on the road leading northwest from Stirling, having outstripped his comrades in their hunt of the deer. Evening was falling, and James, being some miles from Stirling castle, raised his bugle to his lips to call together his scattered followers, but before a blast broke the stillness his majesty was accosted by a woman who emerged suddenly and unnoticed from the forest on his left hand.

"My lord, the king!" she said, and her voice, like the sound of silver bells, thrilled with a note of inquiry.

"Yes, my lassie," answered the young man, peering down at his questioner, lowering his bugle and reigning in his frightened horse, which was startled by the sudden apparition before him. The dusk had not yet so far thickened but the king could see that his interlocutor was young and strikingly beautiful. Although dressed in the garb of the lower orders, there was a quiet and imposing dignity in her demeanor as she stood there by the side of the road. Her head was uncovered, the shawl she wore over it having slipped down to her shoulders, and her abundant hair, unkempt and unribboned, was ruddy as spun gold. Her complexion was dazzlingly fair, her eyes of the deepest blue, and her features perfect, except that her small mouth showed a trifle too much firmness, a quality which her strong but finely molded chin corroborated and emphasized. The king, an expert connoisseur of womanly loveliness, almost held his breath as he gazed down upon the comely face upturned to him.

"They told me at Stirling," she said, "that you were hunting through this district, and I have been searching for you in the forest."

"Good heavens, girl!" cried the king, "have you walked all the way from Stirling?"

"Aye, and much further. It is nothing, for I am accustomed to it. And now I crave a word with your majesty."

"Surely, surely!" replied the king, with enthusiasm. No thought of danger in this unconventional encounter ever occurred to him. The natural prudence of James invariably deserted him where a pretty woman was concerned. Now, instead of summoning his train, he looked anxiously up and down the road, listening for any sound of his men, but the stillness seemed to increase with the darkness, and the silence was profound, not even the rustle of a leaf disturbing it.

"And who, my girl, are you?" continued the king, noticing that her eyes followed his glance up and down the road with some trace of apprehension in them, and that she hesitated to speak.

"May I please your gracious majesty, I am a humble tirewoman to that noble lady, Margaret Stuart, your honored mother."

The king gave a whistle of astonishment.

"My mother!" he exclaimed. "Then what in the name of heaven are you doing here and alone, so far from Methven?"

"We came from Methven yesterday to her ladyship's castle of Doune."

"Then her ladyship must have come to a very sudden resolution to travel for the constable of Doune is in my hunting party, and I'll swear he expected no visitors."

"My gracious lady did not wish Stuart, the constable, to expect her, nor does she now desire his knowledge of her presence in the castle. She commanded me to ask your majesty to request the constable to remain in Stirling, where she understands, he spends most of his time. She begs your majesty to come to her with all speed and secrecy."

"I wonder what is wrong now?" mused the king. "I have not heard from her for nearly a year. She has quarreled with her third husband, I suppose, for the Tudors are all daff with matrimony is concerned."

"What does your majesty say?" asked the girl.

"I was speaking to myself rather than to you, but I may add that I am ready to go anywhere if you are to be my guide. Lend me your hand and spring up here behind me. We will gallop to Doune at once."

The young woman drew back a step or two.

"No, no," she said. "The lady Margaret is most anxious that your visit should be unknown to any but herself, so she begs you to dismiss your followers and lay your commands upon Constable Stuart of Doune."

"But my followers are all of them old enough to look after themselves," objected the king, "and the constable is a man of sense. Leave Stirling, where he has remained these many months."

"The lady Margaret thought," persisted the girl, "that if your retinue returned to Stirling and learned of your coming, anxiety would ensue and a search might be undertaken that would extend to Doune."

"How did my lady mother know I was hunting, when you could not have learned of my excursion until you reached Stirling?" asked the king, with a glimmer of that caution which appeared to have deserted him.

"The girl seemed somewhat nonplussed by the question, but she answered presently with quiet deliberation:

"Her ladyship was much perturbed and feared I should not find you at the castle. She gave me various instructions, which she trusted I could accommodate to varying contingencies."

"My girl," said the king, leaning toward her, "you do not speak like a serving maid. What is your name?"

"I have been a gentlewoman, sire," she answered, simply. "But women, alas! cannot control their fortunes. My name is Catherine. I will now forward to Doune and wait for you at the further side of the new bridge the tailor has built over the Teith. If you will secure your horse somewhere before coming to the river and meet me there on foot I will conduct you to the castle. Will you come?"

"Of a surety," cried the king in a tone that left no doubt of his intentions. "I shall overtake you long before you are at the bridge." And as he said this the girl fled away in the darkness, and then he raised his bugle to his lips and blew a blast that speedily brought answered calls.

James' unexplained absences were so frequent that his announcement of an intention not to return home that night caused no surprise among his company; so, bidding him good night, they cantered off toward Stirling, while he, unaccompanied, set his face to the northwest, and his spur to the horse's flanks, but his steed was already tired out and could not now keep pace with his impatience. To his disappointment he did not overtake the girl, but found her waiting for him at the new bridge, and together they walked the short half mile to the castle. The young man was inclined to be conversational, but the girl made brief replies and finally bemoaned his silence.

The night had now grown very dark, and they were almost at the castle before its high black towers loomed in its dim, grim contour that for the first time since he set out on the night's venture a suspicion that he was acting unwisely crossed the king's mind.

Still, he meditated, it was his mother's own castle, the constable of which was a warm friend of his—almost, as he might say, a relative, for Stuart was the younger brother of his mother's husband, so what could be amiss with this visit?

"You are not taking me to the main entrance," he whispered.

"No; to the postern door."

"But the postern door is situated in the wall high above my reach; it is intended for the exit of a possible messenger during a siege, and not for the entrance of a guest."

"I am acting in accordance with my instructions," replied the girl. "A rope ladder descends from the postern door."

"A rope ladder? That sounds promising; will you ascend it?"

"Yes, sire; but meanwhile I implore your majesty to be silent."

The king said no more until the rope ladder was in his hand.

"I hope it is strong," he murmured.

Then he mounted lightly up in the darkness until he stood on the sill of the narrow doorway, when he reached forward his hand to assist his slower comrade in mounting, but he sprang past him without awaiting himself of his aid. In a low voice she begged

pardon for preceding him. They walked up and up a winding staircase, on whose steps there was hardly room for two to pass each other. She pushed open a door and allowed some light to stream through on the turret stair, which disappeared in the darkness still farther aloft.

The king found himself in a large square apartment, either on the first or second story. It appeared in some sort to be a lady's boudoir, for the benches were cushioned and comfortable, and there were evi-

name. "How can there be Douglasses in the castle of Doune, my mother's house, constabulary by my friend, young Stuart?"

"Your mother's house?" said the girl, with an uneasy laugh. "What has the lady Margaret set foot in Doune? Not since she was divorced from my uncle, Archibald Douglas, Earl of Angus! And the constable Aye, the constable is in Stirling. Doune castle stands gloomy and alone, but in Stirling with the young king there are masques, and hunting and

sister, let us quit Scotland, as we purposed, an accursed land to all of our name, but let us quit it with unstained hands."

"Isabel, darling," said Catherine in a low voice that quivered with the emotion caused by her sister's distress and appeal, "what unlucky chance brought you to this fatal door at such a moment? Can you not understand that I have gone too far to retreat? Who, having caged the tiger, dare open again the gate and set him free? If for no other reason, the

is beside the question, and recrimination is as bad as sentiment for clouding cold reason. What I wish to point out is that assassination of kings and capture of them very rarely accomplishes its object. James I was assassinated, and as a result two Stuarts, two Grays and two Chambrases were tortured and executed; so his murderer profited little. My grandfather, James III, was carried off by the Boyds, but Sir Alexander Boyd was beheaded and his brother and nephew suffered forfeiture. I think I have shown that violence is usually futile."

"Not so," answered Catherine. "Your grandfather was assassinated, and the man who killed him is not known to this day. Your great-grandfather barely murdered the Black Douglas in Stirling, thus breaking his word of honor, for he had given Douglas safe conduct, yet he profited by his act and crushed my kinsman."

"I see, Lady Catherine, that you are too well versed in history for me to contend with you successfully on that subject," said the king, with a silent laugh. "We will, therefore, restrict the inquiry to the present case, as wise people should. To me, then, so that I may be the better able to advise you, what is your true object—revenge and my death, or the winning from me of concessions for your family?"

"I could not wring concessions from you, because you could not make those concessions unless I released you. I dare not release you, because I dare not trust you."

"I foresaw your difficulty, and so I told your sister that, having gone so far, you could not retreat. The issue is, therefore, narrowed down to death and how it may best be accomplished. You have made the tactical mistake of forewarning me. I cannot understand why you did not mount my horse beside me and stab me in the back as we rode through the forest. Did this not occur to you, Lady Catherine?"

"It did, but there were objections. Your horse would doubtless have escaped me and would have galloped riderless to Stirling; your body would have been found by break of day, and we but a few hours' march from Stirling. Here I expect you to lie undiscovered in this locked room till we are safe in England."

"That is clear reasoning," commented the king, impartially. "But have you looked beyond? Who will be the successor of the throne? I have neither brother nor sister; my two uncles died before I was born and I perish childless. I think you mentioned that you wished to extinguish our line. Very well, what follows? Who is heir to the throne?"

"It matters nothing to me," said Catherine, firmly. "Whoever rules Scotland could not be a greater enemy to my race than that you are."

"I am not so sure of that. I think your dagger blow will bring consequences you do not look for, and that your kin, now exiled in England, will find the stroke a savage one for them. You forget that the stern king of England is my uncle, and on this relationship may lay claim to the Scottish throne. Be that as it may, it will be no secret that a Douglas committed the murder. And thank you, Henry VIII will offer safe refuge to his nephew's assassin? You misjudge him if you do. It would have been far better to have slain me in the forest. This castle business is but an ill-judged, ill-thought-out plan, and I am sorry to appear adversely critical, but such is my opinion, and it confirms me in the belief that women should leave steel and state alone."

"I dare not let you go," reiterated Catherine.

"Of a surety you dare not; that is what I have said from the beginning. On the other hand, I can make no concession, under coercion, that would save your life. You see, we are both cowardly, each in a different way. And now, having come to the absolutely logical conclusion that the king must die, you should turn your mind to the difficulties that confront you. I, you may see, am almost unarmed."

The king, as he spoke, took from his doublet a dagger almost similar to the one held by the girl. A gentle smile graced his lips as he ran his thumb along the hilt, and then glanced at his sister, as if to notice their consternation at this new element in the situation.

"If you enter a tiger's cage you should expect a touch of its claws; so, Lady Catherine, your life is more serious than you anticipated. There is, furthermore, another source of danger against you, and it is my sincere wish that in the struggle to come you may not be too severely handicapped. While I am here, my contest is still in doubt, your sister will assuredly unlock the door and give the alarm, hoping to prevent your contemplated crime, or my killing of you. I think it right that you should not be so much as suffer this intervention, for if you will permit me to say so, I admire your determination as much as I admire, in another way, the lady Isabel's leaning toward mercy. I shall, then, take this key from the larger door and place it, with your sister, outside on the narrow stairway. You have withdrawn the rope ladder, so she cannot alarm the garrison."

"But I have not withdrawn it," said Catherine, quickly. "My sister must not leave this room or she will bring interference."

"Then," said the king, calmly, as he rose and took the key from the larger door, "we shall at least make a dash for it. I shall enter the smaller door, which he opened, and before either of the women could prevent his action, or even grasp an inkling of his design, I shall be outside, key in hand, and thrust to their places the bolts of the stairway door."

"The two girls looked at each other for a moment in silence. Isabel plainly panic-stricken, while in Catherine's face anger struggled with despair. Each was quick to see the sudden consequences of this turning of the tables; the two were helpless prisoners in a remote portion of the castle, no one within its walls acquainted with their whereabouts. The king, insulted, hounded and all but murdered, was now at liberty, free to ride the few short leagues that lay between Doune and Stirling, and before daybreak the heavy laughter of his men would be heard in the force with the present garrison prisoners. In the awe of stillness an unexpected sound came to them from the outside: the sound of a man endeavoring to suppress the hearty laughter that was bursting from him. He seemed to be alone, but to be made the subject of levity was too much for the dauntless Catherine. She flung her dagger ringing to the stone floor with a gesture of rage, then sank upon her knees, and gave way to tears: tears of bitter humiliation and rage."

"Ladies," said the king from the outside, "I beg that you will allow me to open the door." But, receiving no answer, the bolts were drawn once more, and the king entered the apartment and gazed down upon two fair proud heads, crowned with ruddy hair.

"Dear ladies," said the king, "forgive me my untimely mirth. Both of you take matters much too seriously. A little laughter is necessary in this world. My lady Catherine, I told you that I could grant no concessions under coercion, but now coercion has vanished and I enter this room a free man of my own will. Tell me, my girl, what is it you want? The rescinding of your father's exile? It is granted. The right to live unmolested in your own castle? It is granted. Safe conduct to England? It is granted. The privilege of remaining in Doune until you are granted? But do not ask me to rescind banishment against Archibald Douglas, Earl of Angus, for that I shall not concede. The Douglas ambition, and not the Scottish king, laid waste the Douglas family, both Black and Red. But as far as concerns your own immediate kin, with one exception, I shall give you anything you like to ask."

Catherine rose to her feet, threw back her auburn tresses, and said curtly:

"We ask nothing but the privilege of leaving the country you rule."

The king bowed.

"And you, Lady Isabel?"

"I go with my sister and my mother."

"I grieve at your decision, ladies, and for the first time in my life envy England in retelling an adventure over poor old Scotland. Doubtless you will be irreparable, for I trust you will return. But if such be your determination, then go in peace and in the daylight. Your journey shall not be molested by me. But before you add finally to your intentions, I think it would be but fair to inform your lady mother that the king is anxious to be of service to her, and perhaps she may be content to accept what her daughters are apparently too proud to receive."

James placed the key once more in the lock, and, turning to Catherine, said:

"My fair antagonist, I bid you good night."

He stretched out his right hand, and she, with some hesitation and visible reluctance, placed her palm in his. Then the king raised to his lips the hand which at one time seemed like to have stricken him.

"And you, sweet Isabel, whose gentle words I shall not soon forget, you will not refuse me your hand?"

"No, your majesty, if you will promise to think kindly of me."

The king, however, did not raise her hand to his lips, but, placing an arm about her waist, he drew her toward him and kissed her. Next moment he was hurrying down the stone steps, and the two were left alone together.



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dences about on small tables of tapestry work and other needle employment recently abandoned.

"Will your majesty kindly be seated?" said the girl. "I must draw up the ladder, close the postern door, and then inform my lady that you are here."

She went out by the way they had entered and shut the door with a force that seemed to the king unnecessary, but he caught his breath an instant later as his quick ear seemed to tell him a bolt had fallen. He rose at once, tried to open the door and discovered that it was indeed barred on the outside. One other exit remained to be tested—a larger door, evidently communicating with another room or passage; that also he found locked, and he returned to the middle of the room and stood there for a few minutes with knitted brow.

"Trapped, Jamie, my lad! Trapped!" he muttered to himself. "Now what object can my mother have in this? Does she expect by such childish means to resume her authority over me. Does she hope that her third husband shall rule Scotland in my name as did her second, with me a prisoner? By St. Andrew, no!"

The king seized a bench, raised it over his head and crashed it in bits against the larger door with a noise that reverberated through the castle.

"Open!" he cried. "Open instantly!"

Then he paused, awaiting the result of his fury. Presently he thought he heard light footsteps coming along the passage, and an instant later the huge key turned slowly in the lock. The door opened, and, to his amazement, he saw standing before him with wide, frightened eyes, his guide, but dressed now as a lady.

"Madam," said the king, sternly, "I ask you the meaning of this pleasant surprise."

"Pleasant?" echoed the girl, staring at him with her hand upon the huge iron key, alert to run if this handsome maniac, strewn around by the wreckage of the bench he had broken, attempted to lay hands on her.

"Pleasant?" she repeated. "That is a question I may well ask you. Who are you, sir, and what are you doing here?"

"Who I am, and what I am doing here you very well know, because you brought me here. A change of garb does not change a well remembered face," and the king bowed to his visitor with a return of his customary courtesies, now that his suspicions were allayed, for he knew how to deal with pretty women. "Madam, there is no queen in Scotland, but you are queen by right of nature, and though you doff your gown, you cannot change your golden crown."

The girl's hand unconsciously went up to her ruddy hair, while she murmured more to herself than to him.

"This is some of Catherine's work."

"Catherine was your name in the forest, my lady. What is your name in the castle?"

"Isabel is my name in castle and forest alike. You have met my twin sister, Catherine. Why has she brought you here?"

"Like an obedient son, I am here at the command of my honorable mother, and your sister—if, indeed, she is your sister—she is strangely similar, can be two persons—has gone to acquaint my mother of my arrival."

The girl's alarm seemed to increase as the king's diminished. Trouble, dismay and fear marred her perfect face, and as the king scrutinized her more minutely he saw that the firm mouth and the resolute chin of her sister had no place in the more softened and womanly features of the lady before him.

"Your mother? Who is she?"

"First, Margaret Tudor, daughter of the king of England; second, Margaret Stuart, wife of the king of Scotland; third, Margaret Douglas, ill mate of the Earl of Angus; fourth, and let us hope finally, Margaret Stuart again, spouse of Lord Methven and owner of this castle."

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gayety. Young Stuart draws the revenues of his charge, but pays slight attention to the fulfillment of his duty."

"You are, then, Isabel Douglas? And now, to echo your own question, how came you here? If this is a den of Douglasses, as you say, how comes my mother's castle to be officered by the enemies of her son?"

"That you ask such a question shows little foresight or knowledge of men. When your first stepfather and my uncle, Archibald Douglas, had control of this castle through your mother's name he filled it with his own adherents."

"Naturally; nepotism was a well known trait of his domineering stepfather, which did not add to his popularity in Scotland. Who can get office or justice against a Douglas? Was their cry. But did not young Stuart, when he was made constable, put in his own men?"

"The constable cares nothing for this stronghold so long as it furnishes money which he may spend gayly in Stirling."

"I see. So you and your sister found refuge among your underlings? And where so safe from search as within the king's mother's own fortress, almost under the shadow of Stirling? An admirable device. Why, then, do you jeopardize your safety by letting me into the secret?"

The girl sighed deeply with downcast eyes; then she flashed a glance at him which had something in it of the old Douglas hauteur.

"I fear," she said, "that it is not our safety which is jeopardized."

"You mean that I am in danger?"

"The same stronghold which gives immunity to a family of the Red Douglas can hardly be expected to confer security upon James V, their persecutor."

"No. Certainly that would be too much to expect. Are you, then, in this plot against me, my lady?"

"I have not heard of any plot. If there is one, I know nothing of it. I merely acquaint you with some hint of my fears."

"Then I charge you as a loyal subject of the lawful king to guide me from this stronghold into which I have been cozened by treachery and falsehood."

Catherine, who had entered silently and unnoticed through the smaller door, now stepped forward, drew her sister into the room, took out the huge key, closed the door and locked it, then turned fiercely to the king. Her beautiful white right arm was bare to the elbow, the loose sleeve rolled up, and in her hand she held a dagger. With her back against the newly locked door she said:

"I'll be your majesty's guide from this castle, and your perjured soul shall find exit through a postern gate I have by my dagger."

"Oh, Catherine, Catherine," sobbed Isabel, weeping in fear and horror of the situation, "you cannot contemplate so awful a deed, a murder so foul, for however unworthy he may be, he is still the king."

"What is there foul in ridding the world of a reptile such as he? How many innocent lives has he taken to compass his revenge? How many now of our name are exiled and starving because of his action? I shall strike the blow with greater surety, for in killing him I extinguish his treacherous race."

"No good can come from assassination, Catherine."

"What greater evil can spring from his death than from his life?"

"His killing will not bring back those whom he has slain; it will not cause our banished kinsmen to return. It will be a murder for revenge."

"And not the first in Scotland," said Catherine, grimly.

The king had once more seated himself, and now, resting his chin on his open palm, listened to the discussion with the interested bearing of one who had little concern with its result. A half amused smile wreathed his lips, and once or twice he made a motion as if he would intervene, but on second thought kept silent.

"Do not attempt this fell deed, dear sister," pleaded Isabel, earnestly. "Let us away as we intended. The horses are ready and waiting for us. Our mother is looking for our coming in her room. The night wears on and we must pass Stirling while it is yet dark, so there is no time to be lost. Dear

king must die because he is here and because I brought him here. Open the door behind you, Isabel, go down the circle of the stair, and at the postern step you will find the rope ladder by which I ascend. Get you to the courtyard and there wait for me; say nothing."

Isabel, Catherine, the king will pardon you. He will surely forgive what you have done in exchange for his life."

"Forgiveness!" cried Catherine, her eyes blazing again. "I want no forgiveness from the king of Scotland. Pardon! The tiger would pardon till once he is free again. The king must die!"

"I shall go as you have bid me, Catherine, but not to do your bidding. I shall arouse this castle and prevent an atomical crime."

Catherine laughed harshly.

"Whom would you call to your assistance? Douglasses, Douglasses! How many of your way of thinking will you find in the castle? You know well, one only, and that is our mother, old and helpless. Rouse the castle, Isabel, if you will, and find a headman, and perhaps a dead sister, when you break in this locked door."

The helpless Isabel sank her head against the wall and burst into a fury of weeping.

"Ladies," said the king, soothingly, rising to his feet, "will you graciously condone my intervention in this dispute? You are discussing an important act, from the commission of which all sentiment should be eliminated; an act which requires the hard, strong mind of a man brought to bear upon the pros and cons of its consummation. You are dealing with it entirely from the standpoint of the heart, and not of the head, an error common with women, and one that has ever precluded their effective dealing with matters of state. You will pardon me, Lady Isabel, when I say that your sister takes a much more practical view of the situation than you do. She is perfectly right in holding that, having me prisoner here, it is impossible to allow me to go scathless. There is no greater folly than the folly of half doing a thing."

"Does your majesty argue in favor of your own murder?" asked Isabel, amazed, gazing at the young man through her tears.

"Not so; but still there is a consideration which I must endeavor to eliminate from my mind, if my advice is to be impartial, and of service to you